

## Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 BOGOTA 00390 132200Z

ACTION SS-25

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CONFIDENTIAL BOGOTA 390

EXDIS

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PEPR, CO, PA, US

SUBJ: PANAMA CANAL TREATY: SENATORS BAKER, BENTSON AND GARN  
IN COLOMBIA

1. BEGIN SUMMARY: A FOREIGN MINISTRY OFFICIAL'S DENIAL OF A MEDIA REPORT WHICH STATED THAT THE GOC WOULD NOT "ACCEPT CHANGES" IN THE PANAMA CANAL TREATIES WAS CONFIRMED BY THE CORDIAL TALKS BETWEEN PRESIDENT LOPEZ AND THE FOREIGN MINISTRY AND VISITING SENATORS BAKER, GARN AND BENTSEN. THE COLOMBIANS SEEMED TO ACCEPT THE IDEA OF TREATY AMENDMENTS PROVIDED THEY DID NOT NECESSITATE ANOTHER PLEBISCIT. THE SENATORS NOTED THE OPPOSITION OF MANY OF THEIR CONSTITUENTS TO RATIFICATION, BUT BAKER AND BENTSEN -- TO A LESSER EXTENT -- HINTED THAT THEY MIGHT BE ABLE TO SUPPORT AMENDED TREATIES. GARN APPEARED TO REMAIN OPPOSED, DESPITE LOPEZ' PREDICTION OF IMPROVED U.S.-LATIN AMERICAN RELATIONS AS A RESULT OF RATIFICATION AND HIS CONJECTURE ON THE IMMINENCE OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW SEA-LEVEL CANAL. END SUMMARY.

2. I REFER TO FBIS REPORT 110312Z JAN 78 ENTITLED "COLOMBIAN PRESIDENT SIDES WITH PANAMA ON CANAL ISSUE," REPORTING COMMENTS BY MADRID EFE DATBRNED BOGOTA 10 JAN, STATING THAT THE COLOMBIAN GOVERNMENT WILL NOT "ACCEPT CHANGES" IN THE CANAL TREATY. THE REPORT CITES A COLOMBIAN FOREIGN MINISTRY SPOKESMAN AND HAS PRESIDENT LOPEZ MICHELSHEN SHARPLY DISAGREEING WITH SENATOR BAKER

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 BOGOTA 00390 132200Z

DURING THE LATTER'S VISIT TO BOGOTA. FOREIGN MINISTRY SECRETARY GENERAL CARLOS BORDA DENIED THE EFE REPORT TO AN EMBASSY OFFICER. HE SAID THAT FOREIGN MINISTRY PERSONNEL WERE NOT AUTHORIZED TO MAKE STATEMENTS TO THE PRESS AND MADE IT A PRACTICE TO AVOID DOING SO. HE WENT ON TO SAY LAUGHINGLY THAT THE STORY WAS ABSURD SINCE COLOMBIA WAS NOT A PARTY TO THE TREATY, WHICH WAS STRICTLY THE CONCERN OF THE U.S. AND PANAMA. AS FAR AS WE HAVE BEEN ABLE

TO DETERMINE, THE EFE REPORT WAS NOT CARRIED IN THE COLOMBIAN PRESS.

3. THE FBIS REMARKS, IN ANY CASE, CONTRASTED SHARPLY WITH THE ACTUAL ATMOSPHERE OF THE PRESIDENT'S DINNER FOR SENATORS BAKER, BENTSEN AND GARN WHICH WAS QUITE CONVIVIAL. THE PRESIDENT WAS RELATIVELY IMPASSIVE DURING SENATOR BAKER'S DISCUSSION OF AN AMENDMENT "PACKAGE" TO THE TREATY. THE FOREIGN MINISTER TOLD ME PRIVATELY DURING THE COURSE OF THE SAME DINNER THAT IF SENATOR BAKER'S APPROACH RESULTED IN PROMPT RATIFICATION OF THE TREATY WITHOUT THE NECESSITY OF A PLEBISCITE, HE THOUGHT THIS WOULD BE EXCELLENT. IF, ON THE OTHER HAND, IT INVOLVED THE REOPENING OF THE TREATY TO RENEGOTIATION, HE COULD ANTICIPATE ONLY TROUBLE AHEAD.

4. THE THREE SENATORS WERE QUITE POINTED IN EXPLAINING TO THE PRESIDENT THE OPPOSITION AMONG THEIR CONSTITUENCIES TO TREATY RATIFICATION. SENATOR BAKER SAID THAT HE HAD RECEIVED SOME 30,000 LETTERS, OF WHICH SOME 500 SUPPORTED RATIFICATION. SENATOR GARN SAID HE HAD ONLY RECEIVED THREE LETTERS IN SUPPORT. SENATOR BENTSEN USED AS AN ILLUSTRATIVE POINT A RECENT OVERSEAS TELEPHONE CALL TO THE WIFE OF THIS RANCH FOREMAN WHO HAD JUST SUFFERED A MASSIVE HEART ATTACK. DESPITE THE FACT THAT THEY WERE TALKING ABOUT A LIFE OR DEATH SITUATION, THE WIFE USED THE OCCASION TO LOBBY HIM AGAINST RATIFICATION. SENATOR BAKER APPEARED RELATIVELY OPTIMISTIC THAT THE RIGHT MIX IN THE AMENDMENT "PACKAGE" WOULD

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 BOGOTA 00390 132200Z

RESULT IN RATIFICATION AND DID NOT DISCARD THE POSSIBILITY OF CONTEMPLATING ONLY CHANGES THAT WOULD NOT REQUIRE A NEW PANAMANIAN PLEBISCITE. SENATOR BENTSEN MADE THE POINT THAT AT THE VERY LEAST IT WOULD BE NECESSARY TO INCLUDE AS PART OF THE TREATY THE JOINT COMMUNIQUE OF OCTOBER 14. SENATOR GARN, ON THE OTHER HAND, APPEARED TO BE UNALTERABLY OPPOSED.

5. DURING THE COURSE OF THE EVENING, THE PRESIDENT WAS ASKED WHY COLOMBIA WAS SUPPORTING PANAMANIAN TREATY ASPIRATIONS. HE REPLIED THAT IN HIS VIEW THE CURRENT ARRANGEMENT IN THE CANAL ZONE WOULD PROVIDE A CONTINUING SOURCE OF TROUBLE FOR BOTH THE U.S. AND THE REST OF THE HEMISPHERE. HE WAS ASKED WHY HE BELIEVED THE NEW TREATY WOULD RESOLVE U.S.-PANAMANIAN DIFFICULTIES IN VIEW OF THE HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE THAT SUCH ARRANGEMENTS USUALLY ARE SUBJECT TO IMMEDIATE RENEGOTIATION OR ACCELERATION OF THE TURNOVER PROCESS. PRESIDENT LOPEZ STATED THAT TORRIJOS WAS QUITE DIFFERENT FROM THE PANAMANIAN OLIGARCHIC LEADERS WE HAVE DEALT WITH IN THE PAST. HE WAS MUCH CLOSER TO AND A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE PANAMANIAN PEOPLE. FURTHER, HE BELIEVED THAT PANAMA'S ONLY CHANCE FOR ECONOMIC VIABILITY WAS AS AN INTERNATIONAL BANKING CENTER, A VIEW THAT WAS BROADLY SHARED IN PANAMA. THIS REQUIRED STABILITY WHICH SHOULD BE THE PRINCIPAL IMPETUS FOR AMICABLE RELATIONS IN THE

FUTURE. HE WAS ALSO ASKED WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF THE TREATY WERE NOT RATIFIED. HE REPLIED WITHOUT HESITATION THAT EVERY LATIN AMERICAN POLITICAL GROUP FROM THE CENTER LEFT THROUGH THE EXTREME LEFT WOULD TAKE THIS UP AS A BATTLE FLAG AGAINST THE U.S. SENATOR BENTSEN OBSERVED THAT THIS POTENTIAL FOR INSTABILITY IN THE REST OF THE HEMISPHERE WAS ONE OF THE FEW THINGS THAT GIVE HIM PAUSE.

6. ONE OF THE MORE HUMOROUS MOMENTS OF THE EVENING OCCURRED WHEN SENATOR BAKER POINTED OUT THAT HIS FATHER, ALSO A POLITICAN, HAD ADVISED HIM THAT WHILE ONE MAY DOUBT THE JUDGMENT OF ONE'S CONSTITUENTS, ONE SHOULD NOT DOUBT THEIR AUTHORITY. THE PRESIDENT WAS QUICK TO ACCEPT THIS THEOREM AS ALSO APPLYING TO COLOMBIA. THE PRESIDENT ALSO MADE THE POINT THAT HE BELIEVED A SEA-LEVEL CANAL WOULD BE CONSTRUCTED SOONER THAN THE U.S.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 BOGOTA 00390 132200Z

HE WAS OBVIOUSLY REFLECTING THE MEETING HE HAD HAD ON DECEMBER 11, 1977 WITH SENATOR GRAVEL AND SAID HE BELIEVED THAT THIS WOULD RESOLVE MANY OF THE ANTICIPATED FUTURE PROBLEMS. THE SENATORS EXPRESSED SKEPTICISM OVER THE PROSPECTS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW CANAL.

7. ON THE WHOLE, THE PRESIDENT HANDLED THE DINNER CONVERSATION SMOOTHLY, THE EXCHANGES WERE UNRESTRAINED BUT NO CONFRONTATIONS OCCURRED. THE PRESIDENT'S PERCEPTION OF THE SENATE OPPOSITION TO THE RATIFICATION OF THE TREATY WAS UNDOUBTEDLY HEIGHTENED BUT I HAD NO SENSE OF PESSIMISM OR GLOOM ON HIS PART.

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